DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL MICHAEL MCMAHON, DIRECTOR, CJ7, COMBINED SECURITY TRANSITION COMMAND-AFGHANISTAN VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN TIME: 9:30 A.M. EDT DATE: FRIDAY, MAY 9, 2008

(Note: Please refer to www.dod.mil for more information.)

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): All right.

COL. MCMAHON: Hi, Jack. This is Mike McMahon.

I'm the director of our CJ7 in the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan. CJ7 does the force integration and training. What that really means is we plan, program, coordinate and execute the fielding of the Afghan army and the Afghan police and then carry on all the training programs to continue their development. So I've got a team that -- pretty high-speed guys that pull that together. And so far it seems to be going pretty well.

I'm available to answer your questions, unless you'd like me just to talk a little bit and then ask questions afterwards. Up to you. MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Well, if you could give us a little background and kind of bring us up to speed on what's been happening there in the past 12 months or so, and then we can go from there.

COL. MCMAHON: Okay. All right.

Let me start with the army because that's the bigger program and certainly the older program. We've been at the army since about the middle of 2002 in building them. We just added the responsibility for developing -- really building from scratch a police force about a year and a half ago. And so we're much earlier in the state there, and you can kind of tell by looking at what's on the ground. And then the comments that I'll have will kind of lead that way as well.

Okay, so let me start with the Army. As I mentioned, in 2002 we started building battalions -- infantry battalions, very much an infantry-centric army -- one at a time. It was taking about 12 weeks to produce one battalion. I happened to be here then as well. And it was slow going, but people were feeling pretty good about what was coming out. Almost immediately, they had a very, very good impact on the public's confidence and the public's reception of what was in store for the government.

As of now, we are on-track to produce 78 battalions in an 80,000-person army, formed into five army corps and a fairly small army air corps, as well as a commando brigade and a bunch of sustainment commands and medical commands and things like that.

Of the 78 battalions, so far we've fielded 52 of various types. It's an infantry-based army, so it's mostly infantry battalions, by far the majority, as well as combat support battalions and combat service support battalions.

It's an all-volunteer army. Interestingly enough, the Afghans have no problem recruiting people who like to fight. It's very much in their culture, and we're capitalizing on that in the way we're building this army.

It's essentially a matter of harnessing a very martial-spirited population into a modern army with modern equipment and modern ways of fighting. So it's a -- it's radicalizing the way that they've -- the way that they conduct combat, the way that they conduct fighting. But we've got no problem here finding plenty of people who want to fight. That's by far from the top of the list of problems that we have. Unlike some other parts of the world, where that is a challenge, the Afghan army has never run from a fight. In fact, we have to hold them back occasionally from that.

The army air corps is a little bit farther behind. Our philosophy for the army air corps is to build a -- basically a mobility air corps, a way to transport troops around the battlefield and to evacuate casualties, so what we call medevac capability, and then a very small attack capability, with some light fixed-wing attacks and Mi-35s, which are -- if you're not familiar, are the Soviet Hinds.

One thing that we're also working real hard on -- and this is very much at the request of the Afghans -- is to convert them from Eastern Bloc equipment, so essentially former Warsaw Pact equipment, to Western-style equipment, mostly United States but all NATO standard equipment. So the Kalashnikovs will be replaced by M-16s, the CKMs and RPKs will be replaced by 240 Bravos and 249 squad automatic weapons, and on and on -- so essentially full replacement.

We are also procuring for them and will train them on the up- armored humvees. Actually, the state of the art of what we have is what we'll field to them.

When all that's done, they'll have a tremendous capability, which does two things. One, it increases their capacity for being the lead for the fight here, which is very much what they want to do and very much what we want them to do. And it is in our government's interest, as well as NATO's interest, to have them really take the fight over. But the second thing it does: It gives them confidence, the army confidence, in themselves when they get much better, which means they will go into the fight more often. And the people, the population, will have confidence in their abilities. It really is a success story in the way the people are reacting to their army.

The old-style army was essentially one of warlords. It was a feudal army even up to, you know, 20 years ago. Therefore they carried their tribal values and their particular warlord values with them, which didn't always set well with the rest of the population.

We're working very hard, and the Afghan leadership is extremely keen on ensuring this was a national army. So every new unit that gets born, they go to extraordinary measures to make sure that it's got the right balance of the various ethnic composition: Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and some other smaller minorities.

And if ever a unit gets out of balance, either due to reenlistments not happening at an equal rate or some other reason, AWOLs or something like that, they do what they can to rebalance the units to maintain that.

It is very, very important that when a unit, a national unit, goes down into Southern Afghanistan, which is used to being abused by people from the North, that it's seen as the national army and not an army from the North.

And by the same token, when the army goes up into the North, and they see people from southern Pashtun land as well as Hazaras and some other people that aren't normally up in the North, they also see a proper mix of Uzbeks and Tajiks and other folks from the North.

So a huge impact on having the national army and, in fact, we think that is probably the most important thing to success here, is that it stay a professional army and it stay a national army. They do everything possible to prevent it from reverting to warlordism or the ethnic animosity and confrontation that really has marked this country for the last 30 years or so.

But real good story on the army. Let me turn to the police, because they're quite a bit farther behind at every level, from the ministry of interior level all the way down to the police in the districts. The police have never been very strong in Afghanistan. They've certainly been second fiddle to the warlords' armies. And in fact, the police force that exists right now is a vestige of the warlord armies. The warlords, when they threw the Soviets out, essentially occupied the area, had their militia, which they called the army, and we've pretty much gotten rid of, and then they put other people into the police. We have not gotten rid of that yet, and we're working very hard to fix that now.

So you have a police force that is very much local, and it's also very much tied to the power brokers in the local areas and subject to their whims, not to the whims of the people or to the national government. Those are the things that we're trying to fix right now. There's corruption, there is -- it's just not a good story right now.

We're working on really two levels to try to fix this. First level is to try to reform the Ministry of Interior headquarters. It's still designed essentially in the Soviet style, a very, very centralized control, which doesn't work in a society where there is no centralized control. This is very much a decentralized society, so they've got exactly the wrong organization.

It's also been accused, in some cases rightfully so, of being extremely corrupt itself. And in fact, some people have said they don't want a good police department because that will mess up their ability to accept graft and that kind of thing.

So we're working to reorganize and then -- and fix the headquarters so that they can be an effective management headquarters for a national police force.

Then we're also working at the low level, the grassroots level of the police to reform them. The problem with the low-level policemen is exactly what I mentioned earlier, that they are the vestige of the warlord society. So they believe their allegiance is to whoever hired them, which includes going out and collecting illegal taxes if that person tells them to out and collect illegal

taxes, which includes going into another district and bothering another tribe if that's what that boss tells them to do.

So those are the things that we're dealing with, in addition to an incredibly low literacy rate among them, which makes it harder for them to really understand what they're supposed to do. So we're executing a program called focused district development, which works at the district level, takes a district at a time, totally revamps them, recruits new people, new policemen -- ideally nationally, we're working on that as we speak -- getting new leaders for them, giving them new equipment, sending them all together to a training center where they go through eight weeks of basic training and some advanced training on policing techniques, then put them into their district and have a police mentor team of coalition policemen and military folks as well to stay with them and bring them up to speed and then make sure they continue to stay on the good side.

We also are building a special police force called the Afghan National Civil Order Police. We call them ANCOPs. The ANCOPs receive 16 weeks of training, so they're much better trained than the average policeman. They're all volunteers. They get paid a little bit more by virtue of being higher rank than the average policemen and they have better equipment than the average policemen. So those -- we're about -- we built about 10 battalions of ANCOP and extremely rave reviews so far of how they do out in the field.

Because they're so good, we're using them in conjunction with the focused district development program by putting them into the districts while the police are pulled out. So a couple weeks before you would send the new district police to the training center, these ANCOP unit -- an ANCOP unit goes in, they establish what right policing is. And then eight weeks later when the district police come back in, the people now have an expectation of what police are supposed to do. Again, very, very good reviews on how ANCOP is doing and how it's setting the stage for the police to come back in.

We're in the third cycle of the focused district development, so it's still early to guarantee that it's the right way, but so far all indications are that it is exactly the way to reform the police here. And we're definitely going to continue it.

There are 365 districts. And we are on number 23 now, so this has a long way to go. But it's going to take a very deliberate program to fix the police here, by far the major problem.

Okay. So with that -- that might be enough background. If it's not, then ask me questions that will give you more background. I'd like to open it up for questions at this point.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Andrew, you were first online. Why don't you get us started? Q Sir, good afternoon, Andrew Lubin from The Military Observer. Appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today.

COL. MCMAHON: My pleasure.

Q Yeah.

Sir, following up on your comments, on the ANCOPs, when you pull the ANCOPs out, and the ANPs go back in again, is there a -- do they improve? It

almost seems just by starting the ANCOPs, you're giving the normal ANP another attitude to stay sullen, to stay corrupt and to stay unmotivated.

COL. MCMAHON: Well, the -- we pull the ANP out into the eight weeks of training. And for the first time, I mean, this is -- it may be surprising but it's almost amazing.

For the first time, somebody has told them that they're not supposed to beat the people; that they're not supposed to collect taxes; that their job is to take care of the people and enforce laws. I mean, that sounds really strange and really basic but it's really true.

And so what you find out is, you know, I mean, it's eye-opening for probably 75 percent, of these policemen, that they just never knew what they were supposed to be doing. So they go do the training. And one thing about Afghans is, they're very obedient. They do what they're told to do.

So now they're getting training that's telling them what they really are supposed to do. They go back into their districts. Meanwhile, the ANCOP have been in there doing what police are supposed to do.

And the people are also educated. They say, wow, we didn't know police were supposed to do this; we thought they were supposed to beat us and take our money. We're kind of glad to see that.

What we were getting initially was -- for the first cycle, we were getting a reaction which we didn't really expect which was, hey, we don't want our police back; we want to keep these ANCOPs.

Well, that couldn't happen. So we pulled them out, put the police back in. And lo and behold, expectation theory kind of took. If you tell people what they're supposed to do, and that they are good police, sometimes they act like good police. And so far, that's been happening in the districts that we've done the reform in. I was a little concerned that by putting the ANCOP in there, we'd set the ANP, the regular ANP, up for failure, because they would be so good, and the regular ANP couldn't, you know, they wouldn't be able to meet the expectations. There is some of that. But it's not been, I guess, nearly the severeness that I thought it might have been.

Q Great. Thank you.

COL. MCMAHON: Thank you.

MR. HOLT: And Bruce.

Q Hey, Colonel. Bruce McQuain with qando.net.

Can you tell me, or can you go through a little bit, about development of the NCO corps in the army, and how you guys have approached that, and how that's going?

COL. MCMAHON: That's a great question.

That's -- and you probably know there was no NCO corps, because they had the Soviet style -- long ago there was an NCO corps, but that was so long that none of them are around and there's nobody in the army now that remembers what they were like.

So starting in 2002, we said, "Nope. You're going to have noncommissioned officers." "Well, we don't want noncommissioned officers. They're not literate, and nobody trusts them." "Well, you're going to have them. We're going to figure out how to make it work."

Six years later, I would say that it's -- the way to describe it is relatively successful. Depending on what unit you go in, noncommissioned officers are trusted and are empowered, but that's not widespread yet. Probably over half, I think it's fair to say, of the units it's going the right way, and NCOs are doing what NCOs should be doing. But it's going to take a while to change the culture of 30 years.

There's still -- one of my friends in the Afghan army says that it's going to -- it'll take 12 to 15 years to change the army. And I said, "Well, what's that?" He said that's when the last of the communists will leave, those that were brought up in the Soviet army or the Soviet-style army.

The -- what we're doing is, we continually reinforce it. So we have strong noncommissioned officers on our mentor team. When my boss, General Cone, goes around, his sergeant major goes with him as his partner, to reinforce how important that is. We have all the full litany of noncommissioned officers schools and a professional development program, and we're really pushing it. A year ago there were about 2,000 -- a little over 2,000 noncommissioned officers in the ANA. Now they're required to have about 24,000. So you know, that kind of lets you know where they were at, what they thought about it, and how well it was going. Today there are about 18,000. So we really have stretched it in the last year. And it's 18,000 that have been through at least a team leader course similar to -- if you're familiar old Army PMOC (sp), very similar to that course. So it's getting there, but it is going to take a while.

There's one corps that I would say is probably a little bit more enlightened than the others. That's the 209th Corps up in the north, who has a commander who really has taken this as his crusade. He empowers his senior noncommissioned officers and forces his subordinate commanders to do the same. Other corps are catching on, but slower.

So the answer is, it's getting there, but it's going to take a long time.

Q Great. Appreciate it.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And any follow-up questions?

Q Jarred Fishman's on.

MR. HOLT: Oh, Jarred, okay.

Q Hi, sir. Thank you for your time.

Could you talk a little bit about -- you touched on, a little bit, the training for the NCO corps in Iraq. We have entire academies that are run by Iraqis teaching other Iraqis. Do we have the same thing with the Afghans, where we have Afghan leaders at all levels teaching other Afghans or is it still primarily U.S. or NATO-based leadership?

COL. MCMAHON: No. The Afghans teach everything.

The only course we have that's primary coalition instructors is the Command and General Staff College, which is major, lieutenant, colonel level. All of the NCO courses are taught by Afghans.

There is a British contingent that is the mentors to those instructors. And there's a -- we have the same kind of courses they have in Iraq -- well, in fact, what we have in the United States, with a team leader course, a squad leader course, platoon sergeant course, first sergeant course, sergeant major academy, instructor development course, drill sergeant school, you know, pretty much the same kinds of things, with the Brits really taking charge.

Here, about four months ago, we broke from what had been a very centralized noncommissioned officer training program at the -- here in Kabul, at the Kabul Military Training Center to implement team leader courses out in the region. So for about the last eight months, we've had mobile teams go to the regions and conduct the team leader courses there.

That's really making a huge difference. Before that, we were getting about 50 percent show rate to the courses here in Kabul. Now we're getting -- I mean, it's 100 percent. They're all full and clamoring for more courses out in the regions, which we're going to try to continue, try to expand on.

So, similar to Iraq, but not exactly the same.

There is a new NCO academy and we're not exactly sure which way it's going to go. We think what will happen is that there will essentially be two kinds of noncommissioned officers: There will be the professional, the career noncommissioned officers, and then there will be, I guess, the other noncommissioned officers, the mass ones. In another army, it might be called conscript NCOs, but there are no conscripts here.

So when an NCO comes into the -- a person comes into the army and he shows that he's got a lot of potential, he may be designated a noncommissioned officer. A few years later, he can say, "I want to stay a noncommissioned officer and I'm going to sign on the dotted line for 25 years and you're going to send me to all these schools." Or he may say, "Thank you. It was nice being a noncommissioned officer for three years, but I think I'll go rejoin my civilian counterparts." So it'll be -- I think it's going to be a two-tiered schooling and noncommissioned officer system. MR. HOLT: All right. Any -- okay. Anyone else? Anyone else join us?

Q No, but I've got a follow-up.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Go ahead.

Q Okay. Colonel, Andrew Lubin again. When I was over in Afghanistan last year there was talk about sending some of the better noncommissioned officers and some of the officers out to Okinawa to train with the Marines. Did anything ever come of that?

COL. MCMAHON: I'm not familiar with that. Can you say it again?

Q Yes. When I was over in Afghanistan last year, there was talk about sending some of the better staff NCOs and some of the officers over to Okinawa to train with the Marines out in, you know, the different bases. Did anything ever come of that, or did that get scotched for --

COL. MCMAHON: No. No, we didn't do that. And I'm not familiar with the program, but I know that that's not happening. I couldn't tell you why.

MR. HOLT: Okay, great.

Bruce.

Q Yeah, I -- just to follow up, Colonel, on a couple things you set said about the police, you said you're doing it district by district. What -- how many districts are we talking about?

COL. MCMAHON: There's a total of 365 districts and then another 64, I think it is, precincts, city precincts. So -- and we're treating the precincts and districts about the same. So it's around 414 total district-like entities that will eventually have to be transformed or reformed.

It's going -- we're intentionally going slower now just to build up the capability. That's for a couple reasons. One is, we're still building the ANCOP, which are really a major piece of the FDD program, as well as our training capacity. We're going to be building another -- a large training center here later this year, which will almost double the capacity to train police here in Afghanistan. So those two things are really what the (long pulls/poles ?) are.

What we're going to find out here very quickly, here in a couple of months is that the (long pull/pole ?) is really going to be our police mentor teams and their availability. We have about 102 police mentor teams in country now. When we get to the peak of our ability to train and to cover down with ANCOP, we'll be looking at a requirement of about 250 police mentor teams. So we obviously need more trainers here in country to be able to get to the full capacity.

Q So you're saying -- based on the number of districts and precincts that you're talking about in your police mentor teams, you're probably talking about each police mentor team having a minimum of two districts?

COL. MCMAHON: Well, they're doing one at a time, but -- so that's why the sequence --

Q Okay. So --

COL. MCMAHON: But this whole thing will take about -- it'll take four to five years to get all of the districts.

And obviously we do the higher-priority ones and the higher-impact ones in the beginning. But as long as we have enough police mentor teams, we think, by the spring of 2010, we'll have all of the high- impact districts done. And then it's policing up the other ones after that.

But to get them all done, you're really looking at a four-to- five-year program. We really, at this point, we don't want to have a single police mentor team covering more than one district. Because we think they need to spend 100 percent of their time with that district and its leadership to develop them properly. As we go on and get into some of the lesser-impact districts, we may be able to start doing that.

Q Okay. Thanks.

Q Colonel, Andrew Lubin again. I want to talk about the ANPs and I've got to talk about the cops because I'm from New Jersey.

Do you see -- do you have enough people on the ground for the police training teams? Because if you've got a situation where you've got to train the townspeople that cops shouldn't steal, they shouldn't beat you, they shouldn't do whatever, you've really got to go beyond police training then, don't you? This is almost a societal change.

COL. MCMAHON: It very much is.

Right now we're somewhere around 13 to 1,500 trainers short to be able to do all of the districts. What we'd like to do is, once you'd link up the PMT with them, they stay with them like, you know, forever or until they're assured that the police are good.

I mean, that's obviously what, I think, you're getting at, is kind of what you need to really change a culture. And if we get enough mentor teams, we'll be able to do that.

If we don't, then what we're going to have to do is get them up to a moderate level and then move the PMT on to another district. And what will then happen is the area provincial mentor team will pick up responsibility for the districts inside of its province.

There's 34 provinces in Kabul, or 35 now, provinces in Kabul, most of which have, well, some have 7 districts; some have up to 22 districts. So to dump it on a province team, in some provinces, you know, that's kind of daunting. So obviously we'd like to leave the police mentors directly with the districts for longer. But it really is going to be up to resources. We'll do the best we can do.

And you're right. If we're starting with New Jersey police, it's going to take a heck of a lot longer than if we're starting with New York police.

Q Exactly.

Are you getting help from the other countries? Obviously the Americans, the Brits, the Canadians are doing the fighting. Are the other countries helping out with some of the mentor teams?

COL. MCMAHON: They're coming along. When we first came up with this, we knew that it was going to be a hard sell. And it actually ended up being an easy sell and it's selling now.

The British are doing the PMT for two districts in Helmand that are happening right now in the South. And the Canadians are covering two districts in Kandahar that hare happening right now.

The Dutch have indicated, they want to participate as soon as we get to districts in Oruzgan.

We think the Germans want to participate and we think the Norwegians want to participate. And we're hoping the Italians will participate as well.

So it's coming along in probably about the right time that we expected -- give it time to take foot and, you know, so those governments know that they're joining a winner and not a -- you know, not a flash in the pan.

Q Excellent. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Anything else? We've just got a few seconds here left.

All right. Colonel McMahon, if you've got any final thoughts or closing comments for us --

COL. MCMAHON: Well, no. The only thing I'd say is that, you know, hopefully I've painted an optimistic picture, because it is.

It's certainly not easy. This is -- you cannot overemphasize how difficult it is to change a culture and that's exactly what this is all about. But the one good thing is the Afghan people are incredibly -- they're incredibly resilient and they've got a fantastic attitude to taking new ideas and to taking help, very appreciative.

So it's a -- for me personally it's a pleasure working with them, and for the command it is as well. And for that reason, we're very optimistic. And it makes us work harder to give the people a chance of having some successful future.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Colonel Michael J. McMahon, the director of the CJ7, force integration, training for the Combined Security Transition Command in Afghanistan with us for the Bloggers Roundtable this morning.

Thank you very much, sir, and hopefully we can speak again.

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